

THE SANCTUARY OF BUNBURY CHURCH

Excavated 1952-53.

By

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During the Autumn of 1952 and the Spring of the following year whilst the church was closed for worship and the repairs were progressing, an opportunity was given of lowering the reredos in order to recover the original dimensions of the east window for which new coloured glass was being prepared. At the same time 2 ft. 2 ins. of blocking was removed from the bottom of the window lights and the levels of the altar steps rearranged and the sanctuary repaved. The area had previously been tiled in 1849 by Minton, Hollins and Wright of Stoke-on-Trent and the three altar steps with marble treads and risers had been added about fifty years later. Over a number of years the floor of the sanctuary had however shown many signs of subsidence and some years before the war a portion of the floor immediately within the communion rail gates had been repaved upon a concrete foundation for the same reason.

An excavation of the sanctuary was therefore not only made possible but was also highly desirable in order to discover and remove the cause of further subsidence.

The sanctuary measures 14 ft. 6 ins. from east to west and 21 ft. 10 ins. from north to south. It is fenced in by 18th century communion rails adapted to fit their present position and entered through a gate in the centre and another gate on the north which gives access to a small vestry usually known as the treasury which has a low well moulded 14th century doorway. To the east of this doorway is the highly decorated tomb of Sir George Beeston (buried Oct. 13, 1601). On the south side are three sedilia and a double piscina. The east wall is pierced by a large five light window having interesting 14th century tracery.

The removal of the altar steps which had been built upon the encaustic tiles brought to light the ledger stone of the Rev. Thomas Porter, which had been first discovered at the turn of the century close to the communion rails and had been subsequently used to form a base for the footpace of the altar. It covered a hole which had been cut through the tiles to explore the ground immediately beneath the altar. This excavation had been too shallow to strike the lead coffin which was to be found here. The Minton tiled floor had been laid upon a foundation of square bricks which had been made locally. They were of two sizes, 7.8 ins. square by 1.8 ins. and 7 ins. by 7 ins. by 2 ins.

They are referred to in the Warden's accounts where the full story of the repaving of the Sanctuary can be traced.

1849/50.

(Paid) Messrs. Minton, Hollins and Wright, Stoke-upon-Trent, for encaustic tiles per Bill £21 7s. 0d.

James Harrison, Chester, removing a monument £2 8s. 7d.

Repairing the Beeston Monument 3s. 6d.

Stonework at the communion steps £1 10s. 0d.
Laying the Communion floor with encaustic tiles £5 12s. 11d.
Paid Samuel Gardner, Chester, for altering, repairing and cleaning the Communion Table, taking down, repairing and altering the Communion railing and refixing it in one straight line, 2 gates, brass bolts and hinges, etc.
Altering and repairing the kneeling benches, stuffing and covering the same including materials, £1 12s. 9d.
Two Gothic arm chairs of dark wainscot oak for the Communion £16.
Two rugs for the communion £1 7s. 0d.
John Watson for restoring the piscina including stone lime, workmanship, carriage of materials, £2 10s. 0d.
Paid for bricks for the underfloor for the encaustic tiles 19s. 6d.

The monument referred to in the second item is that of Jane Johnson (died 1741, Ap. 6) now placed near the font. The foundations for this consisting of a rough sandstone slab were found beneath the south east corner of the sanctuary. Having removed the tiles and brick underfloor (the latter being kept for repaving the east end of the north aisle) the whole area was explored systematically and under careful supervision to a depth of four to five feet. It was immediately evident that graves earlier than the 18th century had been destroyed to accommodate later burials. Six of these were in lead coffins and it was the partial collapse of these which had brought about the subsidence of the floor previously referred to. With the exception of Coffin No. 3 which was 3 ft. 1 in. beneath the floor line, all the remaining coffins were from 1 ft. 7 ins. to 2 feet and varied considerably in size, the longest No. 3 of Richard Davenport (1771) being 7 ft. 8 ins. long and the shortest No. 4 (without inscription) 5 ft. 3 ins. In all cases the lead coffins encased one made of stout one inch planks and in Nos. 1, 3 and 6 there were definite signs of an outer wooden casing of similar construction. No. 3 had been decorated with a double line of ½ inch round headed brass studs acting as a border to the lid and had apparently helped to keep in place a covering of thin leather like material. It is possible that No. 5 had also had an outer coffin of wood but the site had been so disturbed that it was not possible to locate definite remains of this, No. 2 seemed to be undisturbed but here again, the outer coffin if it had existed was no longer apparent. In the case of No. 1 the lead sides had been brought up and folded over in a pronounced roll to secure the lead lid to the inner wooden lid, but in all other cases the join was very neatly executed and the junction sealed with wiped solder. Only three coffins had inscriptions Nos. 2, 3 and 6 whilst on the lead lid of No. 1 there were four depressions forming a small rectangle which might indicate the presence of a coffin plate at some time. No remains of this could be found, the site having been much disturbed. In addition to the burials in lead coffins there were three other burials in wooden coffins having lines of studs for decoration along the edges, but all were very decayed. In all cases the bodies appear to have been wrapped in shrouds tied above the head and at the feet. In no instance was a coffin or its contents removed from the site and future subsidence was prevented by filling each with soil. Little respect had been given to earlier burials by these 18th century grave diggers and the whole site was freely littered with disturbed bones, some evidently of very great age and very fragmentary and brittle. The earliest of the three dated coffins was No. 6 of 1726, and the latest No. 3 of 1771. A fuller reference to these is made later in this

report. The soil was dry and very sandy and had been disturbed to a depth of five feet. In this were also found 155 pieces of medieval coloured glass a few fragments of clear greenish tinted glass of much later date, and a number of medieval tiles which are listed later. Numerous small chippings of alabaster were found as the excavation proceeded and there was always the tantalising possibility that one of the lost Calveley monuments might be found buried here. In this there was to be disappointment until the last day of the excavation when the remains of an alabaster slab, damaged and presumably unnoticed when the heating pipes were installed in the vestry some years ago, was found forming a foundation for the tiles in front of the vestry door. This measured 4 ft. 11 ins. by 3 ft. 2½ ins., and was 41 ins. in thickness, the top smooth and the underside showing signs of the saw marks, known locally as "Rawp" marks. Drill holes ¾ in. diameter and up to 2½ ins. deep, and portions of lead showed that the slab had been attached to others to form the base or top of a fairly large alabaster altar tomb. No decorated fragments of alabaster were found except one very small piece cut in the round about an inch across, and another fragment with hatching scratched upon a smooth surface. Some years ago, a fragment of a slab of alabaster roughly cut to shape was found beneath the floor in the tomb recess to the west of this doorway. This is still preserved and although the full dimensions of the slab are no longer known the fragment that remains shows that it did not form part of the alabaster slab found in the present excavations, being in thickness, and having received entirely different surface treatment. Mr. Albert Large, who remembers the piece being found reports that it was broken from a larger slab still beneath the floor at this point.

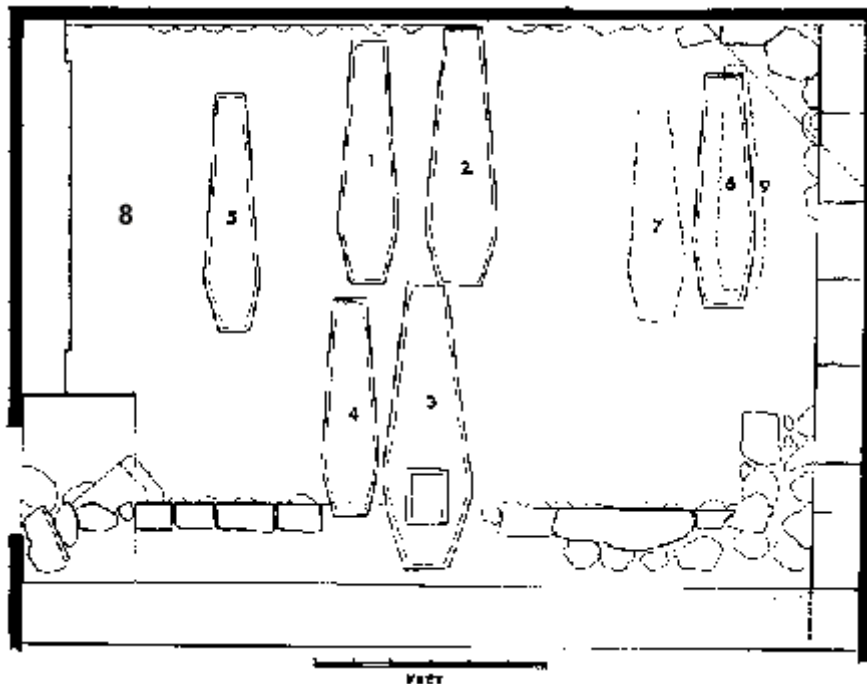
Close to the east end of coffin No. 5 was found a very small fragment of gesso with rounded sides and gilt surface resembling a ray from a vesica. To the west of coffin No. 7 was a deposit of wall plaster one foot beneath the surface (see below, under Miscellaneous finds).

Apart from these finds the most important structural remains uncovered were those of a mason built wall running parallel to the communion step, the undamaged face of the wall being to the east and 12 ft. 6 ins. from the east wall of the sanctuary. Although it had suffered considerably from the building operations of both the north and south walls of the chancel and also the interment of coffins Nos. 3 and 4, enough remained to indicate that it was of a date prior to the building of the existing walls of the sanctuary. The north and south ends of the wall had been destroyed by the foundation trenches for these, and the western facing stones of the wall appeared to have been removed. The lower courses on the southern end were made up of ten moulded stones of two types which had evidently formed voussoirs to an arch having an inside diameter of six feet. All but one had the same mouldings, namely a bold hollow and corresponding round divided by a quirk. A different design belonging to another order of the same arch and consisting of a chevron further ornamented with crudely carved pellets formed the remaining type. All were thickly coated with limewash. These remains are certainly not later than the xii century and it is even possible that they may be earlier. It is interesting to note however that this design is found elsewhere and a combination of the two orders is at Avebury Church in Wiltshire. There is little reason to doubt that many of the reused ashlar blocks found in this wall, belong to the same period. The upper two courses showed signs of similar limewash. At its highest point the wall was 4 feet including the foundations.

The moulded stones were extracted from the wall before the sanctuary area was sealed with a concrete foundation to take the new floor, and they are now preserved with other xii century material found at the turn of the century "near the Ridley Chapel". A note upon the significance of this transverse wall appears later in the report.

Four stones having a plain chamfer also thickly limewashed were also found built into the foundations of the south wall of the sanctuary at a depth of 3 feet 6 ins. and principally at the east end close to coffin No. 6.

MISCELLANEOUS FINDS



Lead Coffins

The following abbreviations are used in giving the measurements.

L Length. D Depth. S width across shoulder. H width at head. F width at foot.
S/H Distance from shoulder from head. B depth of lid beneath surface line.

No.1. (Fig. I).

Lead lined with oak planks and encased with oak, L 6 ft. 3 ins. D 1 ft. 3½ ins. S. 1 ft. 9 ins. H 12½ ins. F 11 ins. S/H 1 ft. 4 ins. B 1 ft. 7 ins. Top of coffin crushed inwards. Sides of lead coffin brought over in a roll of 1½ ins. diameter, to hold in place the separate lead covering to the coffin. No inscription but four stud marks on the lid near the shoulder which may have held a coffin plate at some time.

No. 2.

Lead coffin lined with oak. L 7 ft, 6 ins. D 1 ft. 4 ins. S 1 ft. 11½ ins. H 14 ins. F 10 ins. S/H 1 ft. 6 ins. B 1 ft. 7 ins.

In applique to the lid in lead the following inscription below:

A skull and crossbones G. D. Esqr. Aged 45. 1727. (George Davenport of Calveley).

No. 3.

A large lead coffin lined with oak, and encased with oak having two lines of brass studs around the top edge. Fastened to the outer casing a large lead coffin plate 13 ins. by 1 ft. 5½ ins., having a border of a half round ornamented with quatrefoils within brackets and divided by colons. The top decorated with crude cast of an angel in clouds with an urn, blowing a long trumpet and facing left. In the right corner a sun with rays. The inscription reads,

Richd Davenport
Esq
Died 7th May
1771
Aged 65 years.

The head of this coffin was laid upon the footings of the transverse wall two courses of which had been destroyed when the grave was, excavated. The foot had been tucked under the earlier coffin, No. 2.

L 7 ft. 8 in. D 1 ft. 10 ins. S 2 ft. 5 ins. H 1 ft. 2½ ins. F 12 ins. S/H 2 ft. 5 ins. B 3 ft 1 ins. (Richard Davenport of Calveley).

No. 4.

A small lead coffin having a wooden lining, but apparently no outside casing in wood. No inscription.

L 5 ft. 3 ins. D 12 ins. S 18 ins. H 11 ins. F 9½ ins. S/H 17 ins. B 2 ft.

No. 5.

Lead coffin much disturbed and broken up at an early period but with traces of wood lining. No inscription.

L 6 ft. 6 ins. D 12 ins. S 18 ins. H 12 ins. F 8½ ins. S/H 16 ins, B 2 ft. 6 ins.

No. 6.

Lead coffin, lying over the remains of a much decayed wooden coffin (No. 9).

L 6 ft. D 1 ft. 3 ins. S 1 ft. 9 ins. H 12 ins. F 11 ins. S/H 1 ft. 9 ins. B 2 ft. 6 ins.

Skull and cross bones (as in No. 2) applique to the lid at the shoulder and beneath also applique lead the inscription.

F.P.
1726.

Wooden Coffins

No. 7.

Remains of a wooden coffin lying at the same depth as No. 6, studded on the lid and sides with small round headed brass studs..

No. 8.

Much disturbed remains of a wooden coffin with studs as in No. 7.

No. 9.

Remains of a wooden coffin much decayed lying beneath No. 6.

Tiles



Tile showing the quarter portion of a circle enclosing a fleur de lys having a small four petal rose on either side, without centres. One specimen, found with greenish brown glaze. 11.8 cms. 12.3 cms. by 2.4 cms.



One whole tile and fragments of five others which have been border tiles with a decoration of vine trail between parallel margins. A similar tile is recorded from Chester where it is found with dark brown glaze and also with greenish to orange glaze. Two different stamps have been used on the Bunbury specimens 11 cms. by 11.5 by 2.5 cms. Found also east end N. Aisle and, in church yard (among waste material).



Fragment of a tile with greenish yellow glaze incised with a compass design having two concentric circles embracing a quartrefoil, 11.2 cms. by 11.2 cms. by 2.2 cms. Similar tile found at Tarvin Church (N. Aisle) in 1939.



A curious tile which appears to be a crude imitation of a known type representing a double headed eagle with wings outspread. A perfect specimen is in the Grosvenor Museum Collection, Chester. The Bunbury specimen has yellow glaze and appears to have been about 11.5 cms. square, by 2.3 cms.



A tile taken from a floor design of conjoined circles enclosing four petal roses. In the centre of each tile a quartrefoil of detached pointed petals. Eight specimens, all having very dark brown/black glaze. The impression is shallow. Sizes vary slightly from 11.4 cms. by 11.3 cms. by 2.3 cms to 11 cms. by 10.5 cms, by 2.1 cms., Found also beneath Font and in North Aisle (1953),.



Two specimens, both very fragmentary, based upon No. 5 but having a circle of pellets. 10.5 cms. by ? cms. by 2.4 cms. Resembles a tile at Tong Church, Salop. A design between No. 5 and No. 6 is recorded from St Werburgh Street, Chester, now in the Williams Collection, Grosvenor Museum, and also from the back of Dickenson's Shop, Chester, 1891.



One specimen coated with greenish brown glaze. Hard well baked tile considerably warped in baking, showing compass design enclosing oak leaves. In each corner a small clover leaf. The centre of the tile has an eight petal flower. 11 cms. by 11 cms. by 2 cms.



Found with two types of glaze, dark greenish black, and yellow with patches of bright green glaze on the back. Representation of a shield set diagonally with what appears to be a conventional design based upon the arms of the Earls of Warwick. 11.5 cms. by 11.8 cms, by 2.3 cms. Similar tiles found in Chester (Grosvenor Museum Collection), and others based upon the same design at Coventry, Kenilworth, Wormleighton and Astley (Warwickshire) (see **Transactions of the Birmingham Archaeological Society, vol. ix. 1940**). The two Bunbury examples are much worn and it would appear that originally there were small sprigs of three leaves in the corner spandrels.

A number of tiles had received considerable wear and no longer showed any signs of decoration. A few fragments of tile however seemed to indicate that thinner tiles were also being used, 1.2 cms. in thickness in place of the more usual 2.3 cms. No complete specimen was found. A larger tile, also without decoration, 20 cms. by ? cms. by 2.5 cms., was also used one fragment of hard red clay with bright green glaze freely applied to the underside only.

Glass

155 fragments of medieval glass were found scattered throughout the soil of the sanctuary and at various depths indicating that they had been disturbed many times since first deposited. Three short lengths of lead cawme were also found. Without exception these fragments seem to be of fourteenth century date, and although small the character of the drawing, in particular the fragments of face and Inscription

indicate a date nearer the middle of the century than at the end. Seven fairly large pieces showing stems of varying sizes with branching stalks and seven fragments of vine leaf both in amber and green appear to bear out the statement found in the Randle Holme MS. (Harl. 2151) in the British Museum that the east window in the 17th century contained a representation of the tree of Jesse with an inscription to David de Bunbury and the date 1345. Bishop Gastrell (1714-25) writing in his *Notitia Cestriensis* seems to imply that the glass was there in his time, but it was no longer there when the Lysons wrote *Magna Brittaina* in 1810. Helsby, Editing Ormerod (1882) states that the remains of the Jesse window had been removed to Aldersey Hall, but nothing is now known of it, nor does Helsby's statement find support elsewhere. The east window was blocked some time in the 18th century and uncovered again in 1848.

A summary of these fragments follows. 59 pieces of greenish glass, 7 blue (3 steel blue), 1 amber (plain), 9 flashed red, 6 green and 7 large vine leaves (5 green, 2 amber), 7 pieces of stalk with trailing stem, 8 with feather like design, 4 showing the border of garments 7 clear pieces from the edge of a light, rectangular in shape with grozed edges (6.8 cm. by 2.4 cm), 1 fragment of a face drawn on pink tinted glass, 21 showing architectural or similar motifs and 3 fragments of lettering, the rest being very small fragments whose character could not easily be determined owing to heavy patina or decay. Although amber glass was found in a limited quantity yellow stain had been used fairly frequently.

Several fragments of thin greenish glass of 17th-18th Cent. date were also found.

A selection of the 14th Cent. decorated fragments.

14th Century decorated fragments



Portions of stem with smaller stalk branching from it, painted on greenish glass, with shading.



Large fragment of vine leaf carefully drawn upon amber glass.



Two fragments of similar vine leaf drawn upon rich green glass.



A small fragment of a head showing portion of eyes and nose painted on pink tinted glass.



Feather like subject drawn upon amber glass.



Design upon pale steel blue glass with shading.



Various fragments of architectural detail picked out in yellow stain and sepia upon greenish glass.



A fragment (no grozed edge surviving) of background decoration showing portion of a five petal flower with cross hatched centre. A very similar flower is to be seen on the 14th century Crucifixion panel formerly in Branhall Hall Chapel (Cheshire) and now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Greenish glass with slight traces of yellow stain.



Small fragment of an inscription with unusual lettering drawn in sepia upon a band of yellow stain, having a narrower band on either side in yellow stain, applied as usual upon the reverse side of the glass. Glass much corroded.



Two fragments of an inscription in lombardic letters. Amber glass coated with sepia which has been wiped away to form the letters.



Amber glass drawn and decorated to represent the fold on the edge of a garment. Result achieved by the same process as previous fragments.



Small fragment of a border probably of a garment. Decoration of pellets. Greenish glass with sepia and yellow stain applied.

Gesso

A small piece of white gesso, in shape resembling the point of a ray gilded on the face and two sides, 1 inch in length. Found near coffin 5.

Plaster

A deposit of wall plaster found to the west of coffin No. 7, a foot beneath the surface, and too fragmentary to recover the complete pattern dimensions. The rough plaster $\frac{3}{4}$ to 1 inch thick is coated with a dark greyish black colouring across which is drawn in white lines $\frac{3}{4}$ inch wide paint a square lattice, the intersections being picked out with a circular blob of white paint. The size of each square could not be ascertained. The date of this plaster is very hard to fix. It had evidently been stripped off the walls some time in the first half of the 19th century, and the quantity seemed to indicate that it had been removed to accommodate a wall monument (a nearby one is dated 1824). The wholesale stripping of the walls of the church did not take place until after the sanctuary tiles had been laid. Canon Addleshaw in **The Architectural setting of Anglican Worship**, Faber and Faber, p. 38, states that at Cartmel Priory between 1618 and 1622 one George Preston of Holker Hall, "beautified it (Cartmel) within very decently with fretted plaster work". This may be a description of work similar to that found at Bunbury and although the evidence is slender the early part of the 17th century would also provide a possible date for the Bunbury plaster.

Inscribed stone

Only one small piece of inscribed stone was found, namely the corner with a chamfered edge of a 14th century grave slab of hard Red Sandstone showing that it had an incised foliated design with an inscription running round the border of which HI remains in lombardic lettering (size of fragment 6 ins. by $6\frac{1}{2}$ ins., depth of the stone could not be ascertained).

Ledger Stone of Thomas and Margaret Porter

The Stone measures 2 ft. $9\frac{1}{2}$ ins. by 4 ft. 9 ins. by $5\frac{1}{2}$ ins., and is of hard grey freestone. It has been placed in the Sanctuary floor adjacent to the Beeston monument.

This Stone was found beneath the altar where it had served as a base for the steps and footpace. When found the stone was thickly coated with mortar and cement and it was difficult to clean. The inscription in 2 in. capitals, reads:

Here lie (th t) he Body of
Thomas Porter Master
of Arts and Preacher of
Bunbury Forty five years
Seaven months and
thirteen days he de
parted this life decem
the 14, 1708 being se
venty eight years,
Three moneths and
twenty one days old
Margaret the wife of
Thoms Porter dyed
January the 13, 1706.

A NOTE UPON THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE FOUNDATIONS OF THE TRANSVERSE WALL

The importance of the short length of wall foundation discovered beneath the Communion Rail lies in the date to which it can be assigned. It is certain that it was constructed sometime between the destruction of the xii. century church and the building of the north and south walls of the chancel and sanctuary. These walls have usually been associated with the building programme of Sir Hugh Calveley after he had obtained the king's licence on March 12th, 1387, to convert the Parish church into one of Collegiate status. Almost without exception the stones in these foundations were reused material of what appears to be xii century work. Owing to the proximity of the excavations to the chancel floor (which could not be disturbed) it was not possible to trace the width of the wall but extensive probing seemed to indicate that the west face had been destroyed. It must be assumed that the foundations did actually at one time carry a wall. There is nothing to indicate that they did not, and a liberal coating of mortar spread over the top course of masonry indicates extensive robbing.

A very limited amount of church building took place in Cheshire in the xiiith century (the neighbouring church of Acton happens to be one of the few examples). It would seem therefore that the remains are those of an east wall of an earlier chancel of 14th century date, which must have been comparatively new when it was destroyed to make way for Sir Hugh Calveley's new scheme. There is interesting evidence in support of this. The early character of the complicated tracery of the east window has often puzzled antiquaries when called upon to assign it to the closing years of the 14th century. A careful examination of the tracery shows that it has been rebuilt in its present position, and at an early date and it seems evident that the masons who did this must have been faced with a task which they accomplished only with considerable difficulty. The decision to reuse this earlier tracery was probably strengthened by the fact that it contained the memorial in glass to David de Bunbury in the form of a Jesse window erected in 1345, only forty two years before Sir Hugh Calveley obtained his licence to change the status of the church. The glass remained until the 18th century. The reason for extending the chancel by 12 ft. 6 ins. is not difficult to seek. Additional seating would be required for the new members of the Collegiate Church and chantry and room was also required in the chancel for the founder's tomb which occupied then as now a central position before the high altar. Documentary evidence in connection with this is not extensive but it is interesting. William Walsham in his will proved in 1389 states, "to the fabric of the church of Bunbury and to the Repair of the Church 20 marks". The word repair is curious if an entirely new programme was being carried out. It is more consistent with a remodelling programme. Again, in the *Magnum Registrum Album* of Lichfield printed by the William Salt Archaeological Society 1924, No. 765, there appears a sealed statement by the Master and Chaplains of the Chantry and College of St. Boniface Bunbury acknowledging the great benefits conferred on them by the Dean and Chapter in the erection (and appropriation) of the parochial church, and in Ormerod's *History of Cheshire* it is stated that in June 1386 a warrant had been issued to John Doune forester and Roger de Moldsworth equitator of the forest of Mara and Mondrem for the delivery to the said Hugh of twenty mastich trees for making scaffolddes to be used for the repairs of the Church of Bunbury which the said Hugh proposed to make. Perhaps when further evidence comes to light as well it might, it

may yet be established without question that Sir Hugh Calveley has for long been credited with work for which he was not entirely responsible.



South end of transverse wall from the east

The Vicar wishes to extend grateful thanks to M Graham Webster, F.S.A., of the Grosvenor Museum, Chester; Mr. George B. Leach, F.S.A.; Mr. J. C. Wolley Dod; Mr. David Prior; Mr. Geoffrey Forster; Mr. T. Parker, and to the Chester Chronicle for valuable help and interest shown in the excavation.